

Book Review

Shah, Aqil. *The Army and Democracy: Military Politics in Pakistan*
416 pp., Harvard University Press 2014

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The year 2014 has been especially fruitful as far as scholarship on the Pakistani military is concerned. Three major book-length studies were published during the course of the year: Christine Fair's *Fighting to the End: the Pakistan Army's Way of War* (Karachi: Oxford University Press); Aqil Shah, *The Army and Democracy: Military Politics in Pakistan* (Cambridge, MSS: Harvard University Press) and Shahrukh Rafi Khan, Asim Sajjad with Sohaib Bodla, *The Military and Denied Development: an eroding Social Consensus* (London: Anthem Press).

This, however, is a review of Aqil Shah's book mentioned above. It is an analysis of the way the narrative of the military gains prominence in Pakistan. The story is a familiar one: the rule of the Muslim League, under M.A.Jinnah, preferred the undemocratic viceregal system instead of democracy as Bengalis were the majority and direct democracy would shift the power balance to them. Importantly, the state felt itself to be insecure vis a vis India and decided to build a powerful army. He goes on to analyze the minds of military decision-makers who were contemptuous of politicians. The most important chapters are 5, 6 and 7 in which the author brings in fresh sources to understand the institutional beliefs of the military. Among these are papers written by officers in the National Defence University. The officers believe that they are more fit to safeguard the interests of Pakistan than politicians. In the NDU, says Aqil Shah, out of 987 contact hours students attend just one two-hour lecture on the constitution (p. 237). One component of the military's beliefs is that 'the military continues to see merit in retaining the Jihadi option' (p. 261). This is part of the broader idea that the military is the supreme judge of what is in the national interest and there is no effective challenge to it in the country especially now that the military has its own universities to legitimize such doctrines with academic degrees. Aqil Shah's command over the history and politics of Pakistan is evident from the references he uses and the narrative itself. Like a good historian, he interprets the army's moves in Pakistani

politics, with reference to its institutional interests and its worldview. It is this worldview which comes out of the sources he has analysed with great insight and acumen. This is also the main subject of Christine Fair but that book is not under review here.

All these books are milestones in scholarly studies on Pakistan. They open up new and daring investigations into the role of the military in the economy and politics of Pakistan. Moreover, unlike previous studies on this subject, they have used new archives (especially Aqil Shah and Christine Fair). This book has set up standards which, I trust, will raise the bar for scholars specializing on Pakistan.
